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TAGS: [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [XK](#) [CS](#)
SUBJECT: US-COSTA RICA PARTNERSHIP AGAINST NARCOTRAFFICKERS
BRINGS RESULTS; HIGHLIGHTS NEEDS

Classified By: DCM Peter Brennan per 1.5 (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Close bilateral cooperation and improved intra-GOCR coordination yielded impressive counter narcotics successes since early July. Joint USG-GOCR efforts intercepted four go-fast boats and forced a fifth to turn back towards Panama. Ashore, a probable fuel depot for go-fasts and two cocaine caches were discovered. Since January 1, the GOCR has tallied over 28 MT of narcotics seized, plus USD 3 million in cash. While these operations have underscored the continued willingness of the Costa Rican air unit and coast guard to get out there against traffickers, they have also highlighted serious deficiencies in coast guard equipment and readiness. New coast guard commander Martin Arias may help, but his past record is not spotless. END SUMMARY.

RIDE-ALONG PROGRAM PROVES EFFECTIVE

12. (SBU) The recent GOCR successes can be attributed to three factors: 1) the bilateral ride-along program, which places Costa Rica Coast Guard (CRCG) personnel aboard US vessels to accompany USCG law enforcement teams; 2) better Costa Rican surveillance practices; and 3) better communication among the multiple law enforcement agencies involved. The combination has led to earlier detection of vessels suspected of drug smuggling (go-fast boats), the capture of their crews, and the seizure of a substantial amount of drugs. So far this year, nearly twenty-eight metric tons of cocaine have been seized by Costa Ricans, or in joint GOCR-USG actions.

HOT PURSUITS NET DRUG LADEN GO-FAST BOATS

13. (SBU) On July 9, the USCG and CRCG combined forces to pursue and intercept two go fast boats which had been detected earlier by a US aircraft. One boat and its contents were torched by its crew, and it sank with an estimated one metric ton of cocaine off Puntarenas, on the Pacific coast. The three-member Colombian crew was plucked from the water by a USCG helicopter and subsequently handed over to GOCR Public Security officers. The three were held for deportation on immigration violations as the depth of the water prevented the recovery of any evidence for prosecution purposes. The second boat was abandoned at the beach and its crew fled on foot. Public Security forces secured the boat and its illegal cargo (970 kilograms of cocaine) and through subsequent investigation managed to locate two suspected crew members, now accused of drug trafficking.

14. (SBU) On July 20, the USCG located a third go-fast boat

off the southern Pacific coast of Costa Rica. Upon noticing they have been detected, the crew turned the boat around and fled toward Panama, where USCG lost contact with the vessel. On July 23, a fourth go-fast was apprehended with a three-man crew, all Colombians, who were arrested. Their boat contained one ton of cocaine and was suspected to have been en route to unload its cargo somewhere in the region, most likely Guatemala, by utilizing re-fueling depots along the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan coasts.

15. (SBU) On August 26, a helicopter from the frigate USS Halyburton, located a fifth go-fast along the Northern Pacific coast, near Playa Flamingo in Guanacaste. When the boat crew realized they had been spotted, they started to jettison their cargo of approximately 135 bales of cocaine, then turned toward shore. Once on the beach, the crew burned the boat and fled on foot. This has become standard practice for many go-fast crews facing capture in Costa Rican waters. CRGC and police personnel eventually located and arrested the escaped traffickers -- five Colombians now in preventive detention pending charges. A CRGC boat also proceeded to the area where the narcotics had been thrown overboard, in an effort to recover the cargo.

SEARCH AND SEIZURE ALMOST BECOMES SEARCH AND RESCUE =====

16. (SBU) The CRGC search for the floating drugs almost became a search and rescue. Lacking appropriate communications and navigation equipment, the Costa Rican launch was soon off course and out of touch. The U.S. aircraft which had helped hunt down the go-fast had to return to the vicinity to find the lost CRGC vessel. After a three-hour search, the boat was found and guided safely home, but the story could have easily had a not-so-happy ending, all for the lack of

equipment as basic as a marine radio and a GPS unit. The CRGC vessel was able to recover six bales of cocaine with a total weight of 120 kilos. Subsequent search of the area by the Halyburton recovered an additional 26 bales, bringing the total seizure to 640 kilos.

INCREASED OPTEMPO HIGHLIGHTS NEEDS =====

17. (SBU) The August 26-27 go-fast operation highlighted the limitations and poor state of the CRGC. The few vessels they have are often inoperative due to poor maintenance, lack of funding for spare parts and fuel, and other budgetary constraints. Of six ex-USCG patrol boats in the inventory, only two are operable at the moment. Smaller launches, like the wayward vessel described above, not only lack basic communication and navigation equipment, but also basic rescue/emergency equipment (e.g., emergency flare guns, survival rations, etc.) Despite these limitations, CRGC crews do their best with what they have and spare no efforts to conduct patrols. They will not be able to do so much longer, however, without proper equipment and maintenance.

NEW LEADERSHIP MAY MAKE A DIFFERENCE =====

18. (C) Long aware that the CRGC lacked strong operational leadership, and in light of the coast guard problems revealed in August, Minister of Public Security Berrocal named Martin Arias as Coast Guard Commander on August 30. Arias is a career CRGC officer recognized for his experience in maritime operations. This is a needed contrast to his predecessor, Carlos Alvarado, a maritime lawyer. However, Arias's record is not perfect. Confirmed GOCR intelligence and OIJ reports indicate that he probably diverted fuel and spare parts for resale during his tenure as commander of the CRGC base in Puntarenas. This "open secret" within the coast guard was not enough to prevent Berrocal from naming Arias (or from charging him with any crime), but it may limit the latter's ability to run the CRGC in a transparent, efficient manner.

OTHER INVESTIGATIONS, OTHER SEIZURES

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¶9. (SBU) The weekend of August 4, in an investigation based on intelligence information, officers of the Public Security forces discovered an encampment in Playa Matapalo, Puntarenas, in the southern Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The encampment was evidently used as a fuel depot where go-fast boats could stop on their way north, enabling them to carry a heavier payload. Forty-nine 50-gallon drums were located, twenty-five of them still filled with fuel. As part of the same investigation, Public Security forces raided a house in the same region on August 7, where two metric tons of cocaine were discovered. Three Colombian citizens were arrested and the investigation continues.

¶10. (SBU) In one more case, investigations by the Judicial Police (OIJ) resulted in the seizure of a trailer that contained 1,200 kilos of cocaine in the area of Goicoechea in the Central Valley September 1. This investigation started five months ago. Five more Colombians were arrested.

¶11. (SBU) Close cooperation between US agencies and GOCR law enforcement agencies has been key to these anti-narcotics successes, but so also improved GOCR inter-agency cooperation and heightened security force vigilance, not only against drug trafficking, but also money laundering. This year alone the GOCR has seized nearly three million USD in cash; the most significant seizure occurred on July 20 when OIJ agents found USD 2.4 million in cash stashed in two suitcases in a tractor-trailer entering from Nicaragua. On July 22, another USD 75,000 was found, again at the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border, hidden in the cab lining of a semi tractor.

COMMENT
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¶12. (C) Although we could not block Arias,s selection to run the CRCG, we will lay down a marker with Berrocal that his new commander bears close watching. With the CRCG as one of the centerpieces of the GOCR,s recent CN success, and with assistance to the CRCG factored into our FY2008 and FY2009 planning, Berrocal cannot afford to have the wrong man in charge. Meanwhile, the GOCR,s overall CN successes highlight the continued importance of our Bilateral Maritime Agreement, and the benefits of close international and

inter-agency cooperation, at sea or ashore. We will continue to encourage the Costa Ricans to play to those strengths.
LANGDALE